

1. Cheese and Chalk: Institutional Imperatives Influencing Journalism Education

John Harrison

This article outlines a number of the imperatives facing journalism educators at both an institutional level and at a discipline level. The intention is - in the tradition of good reflective practice (Shon 1995a) - to provide a number of points for action and reflection. National higher education policy, institutional epistemology, issues of teaching quality and the professionalisation of university teaching, the demands for research-led teaching, and online teaching, as well as student attitudes and perceptions, all impact on pedagogy in the field of study. After canvassing these issues, suggestions are offered for a way forward.

In her “Reflections: Development of Australian Journalism Education”, in the December 2003 issue of *Asia-Pacific Media Educator*, Lynnette Sheridan Burns identified the key issue facing Australian journalism educators. Right at the beginning, she states:

The major pedagogical approaches applied to teaching journalism in Australian universities have changed little and slowly since...the early twentieth century. (Sheridan Burns 2003: 57)

More recently, in the last *AJR*, Penny O'Donnell, Michael Bromley and Michael Meadows have all made similar observations. O'Donnell: “...there is more to professional education in journalism than workforce reproduction through professional socialisation,” (O'Donnell 2006: 36); Meadows: “A recent discussion on journalism education at The University of Queensland highlighted the absurd propensity many journalism educators seem to have for reproducing the ways we did things for our students. The world has changed,” (Meadows 2006: 233); and Bromley: “While parts of The University of Queensland are, as the tabloids would say, discovering cures for cancer, the Journalism program is finding it difficult to break free from a culture which valorises a devotion to the topic of cheese toast,” (Bromley 2006: 211).

In order to make a contribution to what is, one hopes, a continuing conversation embracing colleagues across the region and beyond, this response seeks, in an irenic way, to identify a number of the institutional imperatives, and imperatives within the field of study that is journalism, which will dramatically force the pace of change over the next decade. In all probability, these changes will render unrecognisable journalism education as we have experienced it in the twentieth century.

The notion of “reflective practice” (Shon 1995a) is now embedded in higher education teaching. It is this idea which provides us with a method for understanding, and coming to terms with, the future. Despite what Academic Boards may desire, curriculum is never cast in stone; the process of curriculum development is iterative. So this piece is not a pitch for the perfect curriculum (Henningham 1994). It is simply a reflection on the major issues to be addressed in what is likely to be a decade of intense change ahead.

The imperatives facing higher education

The first and greatest imperative facing higher education is this: There is no money and there will be no more money, despite institutions being permitted to increase HECS fees by up to 25% from 2004. This means a stronger self-perception among students as consumers, and

institutional responses which treat the student as consumers, as distinct from learners. There is still no commitment by the federal government to indexation of university funding. Thus the crisis in university funding of existing undergraduate places is permanent and perennial.

At the same time, students will become less engaged in the life of the campus, particularly its intellectual life. To survive, students will take on higher levels of employment, and increasingly will avail themselves of online facilities. Just as the misery index (the inflation rate plus the unemployment rate) dominated the lives of graduates in the past, my new formula, the double helix index, (spiralling HECS debt and spiralling housing prices), will shadow the aspirations of graduates in the early decades of this century.

The task of creating face to face learning communities, particular among undergraduates, will become more difficult. It will require experimentation, energy and just plain luck to succeed. Despite their rhetoric about the value of blue sky research, these are not qualities which higher education institutions like to foster, unless you have already won the Nobel Prize. The risk is that like journalism itself, higher education will track down the path of infotainment.

As infotainment threatens to take over the curriculum, the measurement of curriculum quality and teaching quality will increase. Use of Customer Service Surveys of Students, more commonly known as student evaluations of teaching, will be mandated more widely than at present, increasing pressure on academics to be popular rather than rigorous.

At a discipline or School level, other measures of teaching and curriculum quality will also slowly gain recognition - student performance (as distinct from student perceptions of teaching quality), peer observation and review of teaching, industry review of curricula, and maybe even self-reflection. It is incumbent upon academics to take the initiative to bring these more balanced measures of teaching and curriculum quality to life, to overcome the suffocating influence of customer satisfaction surveys.

At an institutional level, measures such as student attrition, student progression, and graduate employment success rates will be increasingly scrutinised. Indeed, dissatisfaction with the poor quality of data provided by the CEQ, caused the University of Queensland to institute its own biennial Student Experience Survey (UQ SES), which runs in addition to teaching and course evaluations and the CEQ. The UQ SES, again based exclusively on student perceptions, asks students to rate course and teaching quality, their acquisition of specified graduate attributes, and levels of infrastructure support. The results are published in league table form within the university by School and Faculty, (Gaffney, Herbert, Smith & Terry 2002, Smith, Heim & Murray 2004).

Institutional epistemology

One of the difficulties for journalism academics is that sandstone universities who do the bulk of the research in Australian universities, win the bulk of ARC funding for research, and graduate the largest number of PhD students in the sector, really in their heart of hearts only believe in two recognised research outputs: patents and publications in international (ie US and maybe UK) peer reviewed journals. While the ATN universities have demonstrated flexibility in defining what counts as research, particular in the performing arts, the Go8 universities struggle with research outputs in which a lifetime of scholarship is expressed in a fifteen minute weekly segment on ABC Local Radio, reaching 25,000 listeners, rather than a journal article read by an elite of 250, or at best, 2500 academics.

To take another example, the research of one of my colleagues is investigative journalism. Not research about investigative journalism, but actual gumshoe style investigative journalism. Such research has resulted in 2004 alone in the establishment of a Senate Select Committee into a cover up of the abuse of children in state care, (Australian Senate 2004) and a House of Representatives Standing Committee investigation into the same matter (House of

Representatives 2004). My colleague publishes his research on a website (www.justiceproject.net), as well as in the now traditional J School newspaper produced by students and staff, and tenders his research as evidence to the parliamentary committees. None of this wins him any DEST points. His appearance on ABC's *Australian Story* to talk about his research doesn't create any DEST points either (ABC TV 2004).

This narrow notion of institutional epistemology (Shon 1995b), while in the interests of the institution, in that it creates DEST points which are the monopoly money of higher education, is arguably not in the wider public interest. And it the public interest which the denizens of the fourth estate are sworn to serve, along with professions such as medicine and law.

Secondly, the arrogance with which a faculty research committee can demand a list of "the top ten journals in the field"; and the top ten publishing houses, takes no account of the diversity of research activities within a field of study, let alone an academic organisational unit based on the outcome of turf wars between Deans, and other institutional imperatives. Diversity Week is restricted to making those of a different ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation feel at home, not those whose research is "different".

Nor does such a demand recognise the institution's own imperative of cross-disciplinarity or inter-disciplinarity. Our School contains scholars teaching journalism and communication whose cognate disciplines include history, sociology, political science, social psychology, and law. There are even some with a first degree in journalism. The competing imperatives within institutions can leave Schools and discipline areas caught in the cross fire. Ahead lie research assessment exercises of the RQF. All this is leading to a systematisation of the research process, and a commodification of knowledge, a form of positivist reductionism.

Yet all is not doom and gloom on the institutional front. In Queensland, the smart state strategy is central to the institutional imperatives of the state's three metropolitan universities. Determined forever to rid Queensland of the Deep North tag, Peter Beattie and his Labor Government, rightly see value adding as the future for the resource rich Queensland economy. The university vice-chancellors are his partners in this. The problem for journalism is that it cannot find a cure for cancer, nor increase exports of genetically modified Queensland crustaceans. Its fourth estate self-conception may cause it to mock the smart state ideology, bringing down upon itself the wrath of premiers and vice chancellors, the very people who can make it possible to move out of the ramshackle collection of old houses and tin huts on the fringe of the UQ campus that house the UQ J School. At QUT Beattie has funded the development of a creative industries precinct at the Kelvin Grove campus which has equipped the QUT J School with a brand new, state of the art journalism education facility, including a fully equipped digital TV studio. But technology does not an education make.

The professionalisation of university teaching

It is only a matter of time before university teachers will require some form of accreditation as is now required in Great Britain. In Australia DEST has commissioned a Discussion Paper on the issue (Dearn, Fraser and Ryan 2002). This is a good thing, but it will cause pain to many of those who already consider themselves qualified in a profession - journalism. However, ignorance and misconceptions about the fundamentals of good teaching practice are widespread, especially among those who have been in the institution for some time. Notions of "learning outcomes", "criterion referenced assessment" and the teaching of "graduate attributes" do not come easily to some. Jargonesque though they seem, they are nonetheless important concepts for journalism educators to come to terms with.

Many academics consider that curriculum development involves establishing a list of content to be taught in a course. A list of topics the lecturer must "get through". Radical then is the idea that curriculum starts with the question: *what do we want students to be able to do upon*

completion of this course? It then moves on to the question: *how will we know if they can do these things?* Finally, *what do students need to learn in order for them to be able to do these things, or what learning experiences need we create for the students, so they can do those things?* These three questions cover off on learning outcomes, assessment, and learning experience (and, in part, content).

Research-led teaching and online teaching

Finally, also on a positive note, the institutional imperatives of *research-led teaching* and *online teaching* advantage journalism academics (University of Queensland 2003). The blend of theory and practice - lends itself well to the incorporation of research into teaching. Martin Hirst's dictum that "the classroom is the newsroom is the classroom" encapsulates this idea. The notion that time spent teaching inhibits research represents a false dichotomy. The core task of academics is like that of journalists: to *discover and disseminate information and knowledge*. A formulation of this which gives hope to the academic overburdened by teaching can be found in Ernest Boyer's notion of four scholarships: scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Boyer 1990).

Secondly, journalists are, by and large, competent users of technology. Most are also fast, accurate and confident writers. This makes them a joy to collaborate with in academic writing. The combination of good writing skills and a modicum of technological savvy put journalism academics ahead of the pack when it comes to the development of online teaching resources. Couple this with strong foundations in pedagogy, and the combination will be unbeatable. Recently I attended an orientation session on the new "learning management system" (ie online learning software package) to be introduced into our institution. It was pleasantly surprising to see how far our journalism and communication programs were ahead, in our use of open source software, and in the variety and complexity of the file formats we used in day to day teaching. Our philosophical and pedagogical commitment to the teaching of convergence as a principle in journalism, meant we were at least one generation ahead.

What do the students think?

So what do the students make of our current efforts? In March 2004, we surveyed a group of third year students in the capstone journalism course at UQ. We asked them, *inter alia*, about their career aspirations:

- Are you planning a career in journalism when you graduate? 46% said yes; 22% said no and 32% were undecided. (n=42).
- What is your preferred medium of employment? 48% said print, 22% said television, and 15% said radio, and another 15% said online. (n=42).

It was somewhat surprising to find that slightly under half the students in the final year of the undergraduate journalism program wished to pursue a career in the profession. Excluded from this survey were BA students who had taken a double major in journalism. Subsequent iterations of this survey should provide the opportunity for respondents to say why they have decided against a career in journalism, or why they are undecided.

We then asked about their understanding of the functions of journalism. We asked the cohort to express an opinion what they understood to be the functions of journalism using a 5 point Likert type scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The three propositions we put were: Journalism defends the public interest; Journalism exposes lies, and Journalism is just another form of infotainment.

TABLE 1: FUNCTIONS OF JOURNALISM: PERCENTAGE of RESPONDENTS WHO...

| PROPOSITION | STRONGLY DISAGREE | DISAGREE | UNCERTAIN | AGREE | STRONGLY AGREE |
|-------------|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
|-------------|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|------|------|------|------|
| DEFENDS THE PUBLIC INTEREST | 0 | 12.2 | 17.1 | 56.1 | 14.6 |
| JOURNALISM EXPOSES LIES | 2.4 | 7.3 | 14.6 | 63.4 | 12.2 |
| JUST ANOTHER FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT | 2.4 | 14.6 | 36.6 | 43.9 | 2.4 |

n= 42

Surprising was the number who agreed/ strongly agreed with all three propositions. The greatest uncertainty was revealed in the proposition about journalism as entertainment. The most strongly supported proposition was that journalism exposes lies.

Finally, we asked about satisfaction with the current curriculum offerings, and the balance between theory and practice in the current curriculum. Asked, "Are you satisfied with the current curriculum offerings in journalism?" 25% said yes; 15% were undecided, and 60% said no. This last figure may explain why only 46% wished to pursue a career in the profession.

TABLE 2: EMPHASIS ON THEORY & PRACTICE:
PERCENTAGE of RESPONDENTS WHO SAID...

| EMPHASIS ON | TOO MUCH | NOT ENOUGH | RIGHT AMOUNT | UNCERTAIN |
|-------------|----------|------------|--------------|-----------|
| THEORY | 53 | 10 | 28 | 10 |
| PRACTICE | 15 | 56 | 15 | 15 |

n=42

Overall, more half the students feel there is an over emphasis on theory and insufficient emphasis on practice. Ironically, among many academic administrators in the university, the program is perceived as having too great an emphasis on practice.

Conclusion

In summary, journalism academics who long for the ivy covered towers of Oxbridge (Sheridan Burns 2003: 57) are now being confronted by two new realities: a new breed of student and a new form of institution. The reality of students who are disengaged customers, for whom knowledge is increasingly a commodity to be purchased for the best price with the least effort. No more learning for the sake of learning; and the reality of institutions whose imperatives are cash flow and reputation management. However, the way forward is not resistance, but a recovery of a key aspect of the Oxbridge inheritance - the notion of a "learning community", or, more appropriately to journalism, a "community of practice". In descriptive terms, the difference between the "communities of practice" literature and the "learning communities" literature is that the latter has a specific focus on educational institutions and programs; on schools, higher education and what can be termed "adult learning" (encompassing continuing professional education, training, extra-mural programs, adult literacy, and lifelong learning programs). The communities of practice literature is broader. Wenger et al (2002:4) define communities of practice as, "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". Their characteristics are that they:

- ... become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together
- ... develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches
- ... may even develop a common identity, (Wenger et al 2002:5).

It is though a curriculum based on the creation of learning communities and communities of practice, that the craft skills of journalism can be still taught, in concert with the critical reflection rightly demanded by institutions; demanded but not necessarily valued by industry; and absolutely essential for any university graduate in the twenty-first century.

REFERENCES

- ABC TV (2004). "Three Little Words" *Australian Story* 17 May. Transcript available online at <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2004/s1109660.htm> [Accessed 1 July 2004].
- Australian Senate (2004). Select Committee on the Lindeberg Grievance. Available online at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/lindeberg_ctte/index.htm [Accessed 1 July 2004].
- Boyer, E., (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, N.J. : The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Bromley, M., "How good is journalism research?" *Australian Journalism Review*, 28:1, pp. 211-218.
- Dearn, John, Kym Fraser & Yoni Ryan (2002). *Investigation into the Provision of Professional Development for University Teaching in Australia: A Discussion Paper*. Canberra: DEST.
- Gaffney, Lisa, Debra Herbert, Calvin Smith and Deborah Terry (2002). *Report on the University of Queensland Student Experience Survey (UQSES) 2001*. St Lucia: University of Queensland.
- Henningham, John (1994). "A Suggested Core Curriculum in Journalism Education", *Australian Journalism Review*, 16:1, pp. 88-93.
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2004). *Inquiry into crime in the community: victims, offenders, and fear of crime, Volume Two*. Available online at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/laca/crimeinthecommunity/report.htm> [Accessed 1 July 2004].
- Meadows, M., "Journalism for beginners", *Australian Journalism Review*, 28:1, pp. 233-235.
- O'Donnell, P., "Journalism students and intergenerational change in journalism", *Australian Journalism Review*, 28:1, pp. 23-42.
- Schon, D., (1995a). *The Reflective Practitioner. How professional think in action*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Schon, D., (1995b). "The new scholarship requires a new epistemology", *Change*, Vol 27(6) pp 26-34.
- Sheridan Burns, L. (2003) "Development of Australian Journalism Education", *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, No 14 pp 57-75.
- Smith Calvin, Stephen Heim & Jennifer Murray (2004). *Faculty Reports from the University of Queensland Student Experience Survey (UQ SES) 2003*. St Lucia: University of Queensland.
- University of Queensland (2003). *Teaching and Learning Enhancement Plan 2003-2007*. Available online at: http://www.uq.edu.au/teaching_learning/download/TLEP2003-2007FinalAugust2003.pdf [Accessed 1 July 2004].
- Wenger, Etienne, Richard McDermott & William Snyder (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

